

COMFORT DEPLOYMENT 2019: A DENTIST PROVIDES HELP FROM SEA TO SHORE

By: LT John F. Davies, DC, USN

LT Davies is a General Dentist at Naval Health Clinic New England in Newport, RI



U.S. Navy Lt. John Davies, a dentist assigned to the hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20), performs a dental exam on a woman at a temporary medical treatment site in Kingston, Jamaica, Oct. 30, 2019. Comfort is working with health and government partners in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean to provide care on the ship and at land-based medical sites, helping to relieve pressure on national medical systems, including those strained by an increase in cross-border migrants. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Bobby J Siens)

I've always been drawn to the sea. The sound of crashing waves, the endless expanse of ocean and the ever-changing skies captivate my pragmatic mind. The sea possesses an uncanny ability to calm my fears and broaden my vision of what could be. When everything else around me changes, its sights and sounds are grounded in beauty and offer hope for another day to come. As I stepped onboard the USNS Comfort for Deployment 2019, I couldn't help but yearn for this type of reconnection with the waters around me. Even more, I dreamed for lasting change in the hearts, minds and bodies of the patients we would treat as we cared for the sick on the sea.

As a general dentist, being selected to participate in this meaningful mission was an honor. Within the first several days of the deployment, I quickly discovered the vast capabilities of the ship and its crew, and I was

inspired to work alongside so many talented medical professionals. A full-fledged floating hospital ship, the USNS Comfort can carry a crew of doctors, nurses and specialists of up to 1,000 and has a total patient capacity of 1,000 with its operating rooms and patient wards. Our entire Comfort team was comprised of military and civilian personnel from the United States and partner nations, as well as several non-government organizations, creating a dynamic team capable of delivering a vast array of medical services.

As we embarked on this marathon-like humanitarian mission, our team knew that we would need stamina to provide high-quality care to our diverse patient populations. We completed 12 mission stops in 12 different countries in South America, Central America and the Caribbean, reflecting the United States' ongoing commitment to partnership, friendship and solidarity with partner nations in these regions. For each country we visited, we provided medical, dental and optometry services at land-based medical engagement sites and conducted surgeries onboard the ship during a 10-day period.

During each of the mission stops, I had the privilege of working as a general dentist at land-based medical engagement sites. Our dental team was comprised of general dentists, pediatric dentists, oral and maxillofacial surgeons, dental hygienists, and Dental Corpsmen from the U.S. Navy, U.S. Army, and U.S. Public Health Service, as well as non-government organizations and partner nations, including Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, and Mexico. We brought our own dental equipment, instruments and supplies to each country and set up mobile dental clinics at sites ranging from gymnasiums, schools, and community centers. We offered a variety of dental services, including operative restorations, oral surgery extractions and prophylactic cleanings. My clinical skills were both broadened and improved as I became more proficient in extracting non-restorable teeth and treating children.



U.S. Navy Lt. John Davies, and Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Anthony Serpico, assigned to the hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20), clean a man's teeth at a temporary medical treatment site in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Nov. 9, 2019. Comfort is working with health and government partners in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean to provide care on the ship and at land-based medical sites, helping to relieve pressure on national medical systems, including those strained by an increase in cross-border migrants. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Danny Ray Nuñez Jr.)

At the majority of the sites, we would arrive to crowds of people waiting for their chance to get their problem addressed. Many of my patients would tell me stories of spending the night outside the gate waiting in line, or walking for hours or even days for the possibility to receive care. As they sat in my dental chair, I would try to empathize with their concerns and stories and provide the best dental care I possibly could. And as my smile met theirs, I was reminded of all the good a smile can bring—connection across language barriers, reassurance in anxiety, comfort in pain. Our team saw hundreds of dental patients per week in a fast-paced clinical environment. While this could lend itself to focusing on the quantity of care provided, I reminded myself that the most important person is the patient in my chair. I learned that quality connections and fulfilling work are created when I slow down and open myself up to giving and receiving love.

Many of our mission stops were in Spanish-speaking countries, which afforded us the opportunity to work alongside local interpreters, most of whom were medical or dental students. One of my patients in Santa Marta, Colombia was a boy with profound deafness. He came to the dental clinic with his mother who spoke Spanish and utilized sign language to communicate with her son. While I picked up some conversational dental sentences and phrases in Spanish throughout the mission, I was still limited in what I could communicate to my patients in their native tongue. So as I spoke in English and my interpreter translated in

Spanish to my patient's mother, she then used sign language to communicate with her son. I found myself in awe of the successful collaboration. Moreover, I was grateful for the interpreter, without whom I would not have been able to render the appropriate dental care.

While most of my work during the mission centered on providing quality dental care to vulnerable patients, my time on the USNS Comfort also provided me with many new and unique experiences that I will never forget. I journeyed through the Panama Canal on two separate occasions. I crossed the equator, transforming from a slimy Pollywog to a trusty Shellback. I flew to work on a tactical helicopter. I treated a crewmember's painful tooth while on a moving ship. And through all these new experiences, I met amazing people and created meaningful friendships that will extend beyond this deployment.

After five months at sea, I can still say that the ocean has its way of gripping me. As I stand on the weather decks and direct my gaze to the shifting waters, in them I see the faces of patients who have moved me. I see the elderly woman who had to wait three years for an opportunity to get her painful tooth extracted. I see the young girl who gets bullied at school because of her trouble speaking with her lingual frenum, or tongue tie. I see the middle-aged man who walked from Venezuela to Peru for hope of dental care and a better life. It's patients like these who have touched my life. From them I've learned the gift of health. From them I've seen the importance of reaching out and using your gifts to serve others in need. I'll never look at the sea in the same light.

For more on USNS Comfort Deployment 2019, follow the link below.

<https://navylive.dodlive.mil/2019/06/25/enduring-promise-usns-comfort-deployment-2019/> .